



HOW TO...

Use mail merge

Do you want to send the same letter to many different people without the fuss? Lynley Oram shows you how to save time and avoid repetitive tasks by using Ability Office to create a mail merge

If you've ever filled in the invitations for a party, you'll know how boring it is to write the same thing over and over again. But if you have your friends' or clients' addresses on your computer, you can let your word-processing program do all the tedious stuff for you.

Ability Office is a low-cost (£35) office suite that comes pre-installed on many home PCs. Despite its budget status, however, Ability includes many of the tools found in fully featured programs, such as a mail merge facility. Here we'll show you how to use this on a form letter that is sent out to a number of people, the only change being the person to whom it is addressed.

Since it involves setting up a database to start with, doing this is also a good way to get to grips with that part of the Ability Office suite.

1 First you need to get all your contacts listed in a database. Start the Ability Database application and click the New button. In the Create New Database dialog box, pick a suitable name and location.

2 If this is the first time you've used a database, it is best to start with the wizard. Double-click on Create a new table by using wizard. In the dialog box that appears, select Customer and then click Next.

In the next screen there is a list of fields on the right, with a blank list on the left. The fields on the right are the ones that will appear in your database. To remove a field that you don't need, highlight it and click the single left-pointing arrow between the two lists. The double pointing arrows will move all the items from one list to the other. Click Finish.

3 Before you get to your new database, the New Table dialog box will appear. Here you can play around with the data formats of the table; for example, you might want to select Numeric for the Tel field.

Click in a field box, and then on the arrow that appears to open the drop-down menu. For our purposes the fields are all fine as they are. Click OK, enter a suitable name in the Save As box, and click OK again.

4 Your new table will now be listed in the Objects menu. To locate it in future, make sure you select Tables from the left-hand menu.

Open the database by double-clicking on its name, which is Contacts in our example. Enter the details of your contacts. As you're working, periodically click the Save button on the toolbar (it has the icon of a floppy disk).

5 Start Ability Write and open a new document. Enter the information that will be the same for all the form letters.

Either leave spaces or, to help with formatting, insert placeholders for the parts of the letter that will need to be different. In our example the placeholders are Firstname and Surname. Highlight Firstname, delete the text and, without moving the cursor on the page, select Mail Merge Field from the Insert menu. Click on the button with the three dots to the right of the File Name box. In the dialog box that appears, click the Look In box to locate your database. If you can't see it when you open its folder, try changing the file type at the bottom of the box. Highlight your database and click Open.

6 This will take you back to the Insert Mail Merge Field dialog box. By default, the first field in your database is selected. In our example, this is the title. However, what we want to appear is the person's first name. Click on the down-pointing arrow to the right of the Data Item box and select Firstname from the menu. Click OK. Do the same with the Surname. To see if it has worked, select Print Preview from the File menu. The first page should appear with the first and last name of the first contact in your list. Click the Next Page button at the top of the screen. It will have the name of the second contact, and so on.

1 Create a new database

2 Create Table by using wizard

3 New Table:

Name	Type
CustomerTitle	Character
Firstname	Character
Lastname	Character
Company	Character
Address1	Character
Address2	Character
Town	Character
City	Character
County	Character

4 Table: Contacts

CustomerTitle	Firstname	Lastname	Address1	Address2	Town	City	County
Ms	Joanna	Bloggs	Willow Cottage	1	The Str		
Dr	Daniel	Jackson	Apt 341	2	The Lof		

5 Computer Shopper

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6 Insert Mail Merge Field

File Name: C:\Documents and Settings\DP2307\My Documents\...

Data Source: Contacts

Data Item: Firstname